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### This is a Present from a Small, Distant World

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*This is a Present from a Small, Distant World*  
by Samantha Slone

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
Washington University in St. Louis  
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## Introduction

I am a Filipino-American born to two factory workers in rural Ohio. As an artist, I am guided by the multi-dimensional perspectives that this position offers. Coming from a working-class family with an archipelagic ancestral home, I am deeply conscious of the vulnerabilities of poor communities in destabilized ecological conditions and how that ecology connects us across the biosphere.

I make paintings in the style of the Dutch and Old Masters and media installations that depict natural landscapes as distanced, deconstructed forms. What I explore most in my practice is our—the United States’ and its peoples’<sup>I</sup>—damaged relationship with land and nature and how that affects the way we act upon the world.<sup>II</sup> I consider myself to be operating in the realm of environmental art; I interrogate our economic and digital ecologies as artificial landscapes<sup>I</sup>

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<sup>I</sup> The word “anthropocene” (root anthropo-, relating to humankind) suggests that all people are responsible for climate destruction, but there are specific global powers which enacted and benefitted most from the extraction and wealth of the industrial revolution. This includes the United States, and I’ll be orienting my arguments from a U.S. perspective in order to remain within reach of personal experience. I note the connection between power and responsibility for the sake of clarity on the complex topic of the climate crisis.

Casey Crownhart, “These Three Charts Show Who Is Most to Blame for Climate Change,” MIT Technology Review, November 21, 2022, [https://peri.umass.edu/greenhouse-100-polluters-index-current](https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/11/18/1063443/responsible-climate-change-charts/#:~:text=China%20is%20currently%20the%20highest,with%20India%20and%20Russia%20following;“New%20Report%20Shows%20Just%20100%20Companies%20Are%20Source%20of%20Over%2070%20of%20Emissions,”CDP, accessed April 28, 2023, https://www.cdp.net/en/articles/media/new-report-shows-just-100-companies-are-source-of-over-70-of-emissions; Matthew Baylor, “Greenhouse 100 Polluters Index: (2022 Report, Based on 2020 Data),” PERI, December 17, 2022, <a href=).

<sup>II</sup> The focus of this text is not on identifying a place for blame or convincing the reader of the legitimacy of the climate crisis, but to address a broader societal condition of disconnection from and objectification of the natural world. I focus on the links between capitalist systems, new media ecologies, and the attention economy with anthropocentrism as systemic objectifying forces.

which suspend us from the natural by dissecting the dualisms of man and nature as well as progress and sustainability.<sup>2</sup> These dualisms indicate more of a power struggle than a relationship. Using classical, science fictional, and contemporary media visual languages, I hope to present these ideas as part of a historic trajectory and continuum.

Indigenous perspectives are newly being invited into spaces of public discourse and federal decision-making in the United States<sup>3</sup>—a fact which indicates to me that we are aware we have acted upon the world as if we are not part of it, aware that we are no longer rooted in the natural world. I speak from diaspora, a space whose dwellers know the prospect of missing roots, and also as an American. Twice-removed, I seek a personal practice which both cultivates a reconnection to nature within myself and conveys the urgency of this missing relationship in our society. Although the inclusion of diverse perspectives is a crucial step, I believe it is our responsibility as a society to examine the systemic sources of our relational rift in pursuit of a new paradigm of being human in the world.

## Chapter 1

### The Storm Which We Call Progress

I depict current ecological disasters as a memorialization against this attention economy.<sup>4</sup> Each of the disasters depicted in my paintings was occurring at the time of the painting's creation. The United States was one of the prime beneficiaries of the industrial revolution, and yet we are largely sheltered from our ecological legacy by the organizational systems we have in place.<sup>5</sup> Waste management, for example, provides the illusion of an “away” to throw our garbage.<sup>6</sup> More broadly, a globalized trade network creates a similar disjunction; the distance between consumer and resource in a globalized market economy renders land and laborer invisible.<sup>7</sup> Pair this with our urban distractions, hypnotic habits of the 9-to-5, and algorithm-guided media submersion; these are not conditions conducive to remaining connected to the present.<sup>8</sup> We are so far removed from the means of production that we never really have to be confronted by dwindling resources, unethical sweatshops, or decimated landscapes—so far removed that a world on fire is only really trending for twenty-four hours before being overtaken by topics of greater entertainment value or anxiety relief.

To visualize this removal from nature, I think of a societal ivory tower: aloft and operating as if without consequence for the outside world, anthropocentrism de-personified. I often try to convey a deceptive sense of safety, hermeticism, or detachment in my paintings and installations to illustrate this. This can be seen most clearly in the following painting: *Bushfire* (2021), in which the still-life stands untouched by the chaos of the burning bush beyond. It is a backdrop,<sup>9</sup> something inert to be culled and built upon, just as much an object as everything sprawled upon the table.



Figure 1. Samantha Slone, *Bushfire*, 2021,  
34 x 44 inches, oil on canvas.

In consideration of the U.S. relationship with nature, the capitalist landscape is an important lens, one characterized by the commodification of nature. Motivated by efficiency and surplus production, the commodification of nature becomes inevitable and innate to the system.<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx's words on the matter are echoed by many other political economists: "Nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production."<sup>11</sup> This objectification of nature, where it "ceases to be recognized as a power for itself," is the damaged relationship of which I speak. In this landscape, man and nature exist together merely as consumer and resource. I think of this relationship and its lack of reciprocity, where one party holds all the power, and I wouldn't call it a relationship at all. The ecologically unsustainable path we've followed, which has led to such ecological detriments as global warming, ocean acidification, plastic pollution, and more, is inextricably tied to this system, as they are caused by extractive practices and surplus production. Marx refers to increasing capital development and progress as "the great civilizing influence of capital."<sup>12</sup>

I use the still-life to visualize a commodity relationship. The organic contours of the sprawled forms in works like Adriaen van Utrecht's *Pronkstilleven* echoed a landscape to me and offered the potential for a richness of symbolism and variety of representation. The still-life of the Dutch Golden Age was a genre born of a newly-formed material culture, which early modern Europe formed a visual discourse around in the form of the still-life.<sup>13</sup> The fresh presence of a middle class, formed during new economic prosperity, used these paintings as a form of socioeconomic expression or clout.





Figure 2. Adriaen van Utrecht, *Pronkstilleven*, 1644, 72.8 x 95.4 inches, Oil on canvas.



Figure 3. Chris Jordan, sample of *Midway: Message from the Gyre*, 2009 – current.  
Courtesy of Chris Jordan.

The work of environmental artist Chris Jordan was also quite formative for me and is a large part of why I consider myself an environmental artist, though my work far from resembles others pioneers in the field such as Robert Morris or Agnes Denes. His series, *Midway: Message from the Gyre*, includes dozens of photographs of albatross carcasses full of the ingested plastic waste that killed them. It's a stunning depiction of the detritus of our mass consumption. The albatrosses resemble a still-life themselves, a *vanitas*<sup>14</sup> with plastic as a memento mori—a reminder not only of death, but of what legacies will outlast us.

I feel that the still-life is a more apt representation of a capitalist landscape than a landscape itself. In the painted form, the distinct historic baggage of the genre creates a view of environmental issues that uses the language of the mechanisms that created them—the language of capital, commodity, and consumption. I have Marx's concept of commodity fetishism in mind when composing my paintings; when the means of production are invisible, economic value becomes attributed without material or labor in mind.<sup>15</sup> Instead, an unreality is formed as economic relationships of production and exchange become social relationships between objects, such as merchandise and money.<sup>16</sup> The still-life's historic integration of image and object into a social order makes the genre especially suitable for supporting this contemporary conversation. In this context of capital relations, the still-life becomes representative of domesticity, interiority, and a culture that exalts production.

## Chapter 2

### The Great Civilizing Influence

The anthropologist and archeologist Michael Frachetti makes a critical connection between the way humans envision utopia—as guided by our ideological narrative of civilization<sup>17</sup>—and the way we act upon or produce the world around us. He states that “Our unique ability to envision a world outside of our material reality may very well be at the foundation of the origins of our civilization.”<sup>18</sup> He makes the point that, at least in our culture, we envision utopia as “fossil-fueled, technology driven, and urban,”<sup>19</sup> and that our consistent failure to reach that utopia is because of its unsustainability. I take great inspiration from that idea of utopia as a productive force.

A painting and an image can have the power to embody and guide the movements of a culture by giving visual form to a utopian idea when a nation or culture begins to identify with that view. An example may be the Westward Expansion-era painters, such as Albert Bierstadt, whose paintings aided in the American vision of settlement.<sup>20</sup>

Although I’ve used the still-life to represent landscape for some time, I always had an aversion to depicting a classic landscape on its own. Its traditional format held something strange for me, a sense of inaccessibility or containment, as if my simply standing before it were an active reinforcement of the man-nature false dichotomy that I reject. As I was considering my culture’s relationship to land and nature, I was interested in unpacking the irony that depicting a landscape felt like the worst possible way to speak to this topic. I couldn’t depict an idyll without some feeling of naïveté or anachronism. I couldn’t depict the grandeur of nature without thinking of the imperialist message of the American Westward Expansion-era painters. Anything captured

in that horizontal format just felt—captured. It felt like I was binding a whole world into a sensory object, turning it into something that could be possessed. The metaphorical temporalization of a living space felt too objectifying.

If I consider the still-life to be one of those utopian embodiments in a capitalist landscape, then the landscape idyll feels in close proximity. I think of the pastoral, in particular, along the writings of ecocritic Lawrence Buell: “the pastoral has become almost synonymous with the idea of a (re)turn to a less urbanized, more natural state of existence.”<sup>21</sup>



Figure 4. Samantha Slone, *Moira (Rum Creek)* 2022, 30 x 80 inches, oil on panel.

My painting *Moira (Rum Creek)* (2022) depicts a fire from Rum Creek, Oregon. In this piece, I exaggerated the landscape format into more of a panorama. Three still-life pieces are mounted a few inches before the landscape so that they cast a shadow upon it. The composition of the objects within mimics the undulation of the landscape's valley, and the objects are backlit as if the fire is affecting that interior space. This subtle breach of the domestic space suggests a falsehood in the division of the two spaces, recalling the fiction of the man-nature divide once again.

I am drawn to the pastoral; I consider often what it means to view nature as an escape,<sup>22</sup> a perspective that is still very relevant today. Although being an outdoorswoman is a crucial, enriching part of my life, I wonder if that escapism isn't just another kind of objectification born from a privileged vantage point. The still-lives in *Moira (Rum Creek)* appear architectural to me, recalling the pastoral piece *Meetinghouse Hill, Roxbury, Massachusetts* by John Ritto Penniman (Figure 5). Art historian Angela Miller says about this piece, "The work speaks to Americans' pride in their ability to carve out a harmonious middle landscape balanced between raw wilderness, which resists human form, and overcivilization, in which a prideful arrogance has shut out natural virtue."<sup>23</sup> Buell raised concerns about pastoral depictions in literature as well, noting that the tendency to identify nation with countryside can "[reduce] the land to a highly selective ideological construct."<sup>24</sup> With *Moira (Rum Creek)* I wield the genre with an awareness of this problematic baggage, creating a kind of toxic pastoral<sup>25</sup> which still communicates Buell's classic turn from urbanism.



Figure 5.

John Ritto Penniman, *Meetinghouse Hill, Roxbury, Massachusetts*, 1799,  
29 × 37 inches, oil on canvas.

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 6. Samantha Slone, *So We May Live Into Yours*, 2022, 60x80 inches, oil on panel.

I often use shadows and trompe l'oeil representation methods to flatten my rendered natural spaces, drawing attention to the idea of the captured sensory object<sup>26</sup> and the idea of landscape and environment as this inert backdrop to a subject or to our lives. In this iteration, I chose a vertical format, considering portraiture. *So We May Live Into Yours* (2022) is eight-feet tall, and I wanted to create a composition that guided the gaze upward and enveloped the viewer, both mirroring and surpassing the body standing before it—a doorway instead of a window. The vitrine in the middle, which cuts into that backdrop, was painted from a 3D-rendered reference, and uses the default, clay-body gray to connote its construction. I built this controlled, otherworldly interior scene to appear frozen and hermetic, a vacuum that earthly physics don't apply to, again referencing our societal ivory tower and the man-nature dualism.

In the furthest window, the Voyager Golden Record hovers.<sup>27</sup> This was essentially a time capsule of humanity, inscribed with sounds and images which tell a story of humanity to extraterrestrial beings; two of the records were launched into space on a journey to exit our solar system in 1977. On its cover is a careful key that instructs extraterrestrials how to play the record and locate earth. A universal unit of time needed to be established in order for the correct play speed to be communicated: the time period associated with a fundamental transition of the hydrogen atom, presumably ubiquitous across all of the cosmos. I find something so poetic in that effort to locate a point of translation with an unknown other. Included in the record was a greeting written by President Jimmy Carter: “This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours.”<sup>28</sup>



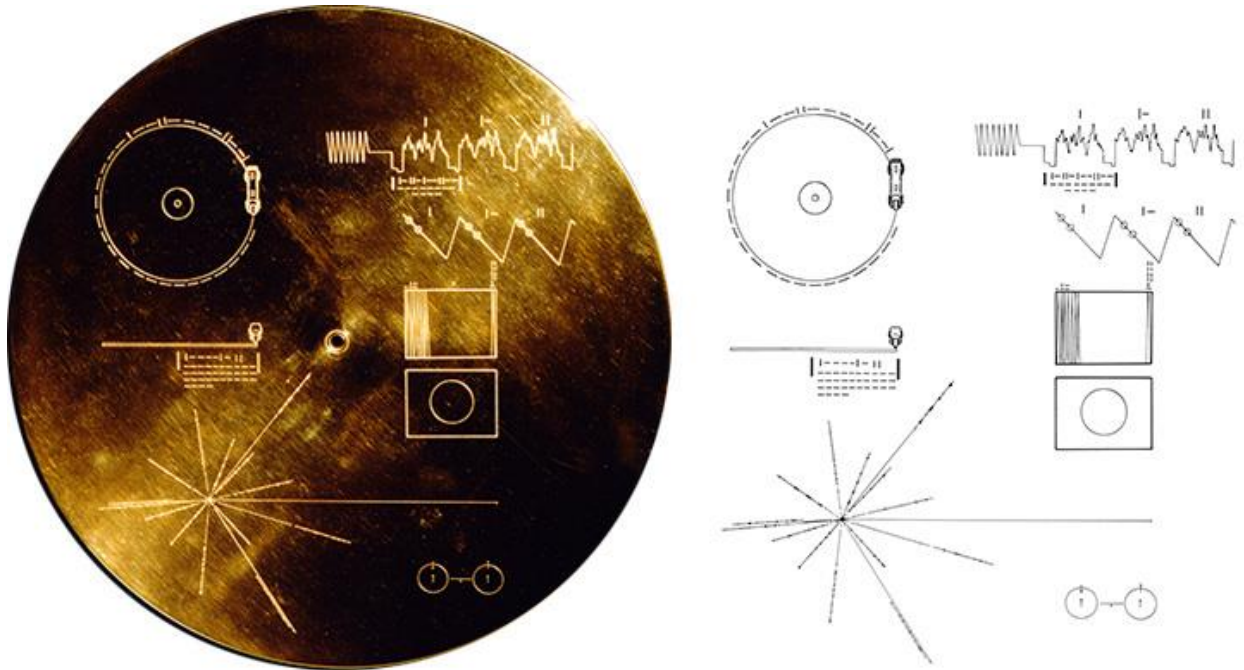


Figure 7. The Golden Record cover shown with its extraterrestrial instructions.  
Courtesy of NASA/JPL.<sup>29</sup>

I often use imagery referencing NASA voyages or the space race. Cosmic initiatives hold a poetic duality for me akin to *vanitas*. On one hand, dreams of space travel and science fiction seem to be one of the last remaining holdouts of global romanticization. On the other is the stark reality of the space race as a political tournament between the world's superpowers. The vacuum just beyond our atmosphere is yet another colonial pathway; NATO has already formulated policies which consider space as a new operational domain.<sup>30</sup>

Mars is now understood in popular media to be the destination to which the world's wealthiest elite will escape when Earth becomes uninhabitable.<sup>31</sup> Once a blank canvas for science fiction and wonder, this truly foreign landscape has become a symbol as dismal as its lifeless surface. The romance fades, and utopia becomes dystopia.



Figure 8. Samantha Slone, *Endling*, 2022,  
3D digital render.

In this digital scene, *Endling*, I created a hermetic non-space of suspended nostalgia.<sup>32</sup> Mars lies beyond the windows, the 1955 television set sits on a pedestal in an interior reminiscent of a renaissance religious painting.<sup>33</sup> It began as an experiment, but soon afterwards, I stumbled upon a segment from Jean Baudrillard's *America* which felt uncannily linked to the image. It transformed the piece's significance to me, and I've now carried the image into other pieces. It reads,

There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room. It is even stranger than a man talking to himself or a woman standing dreaming at her stove. It is as if another planet is communicating with you. Suddenly the TV reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages (you can easily imagine it still functioning after humanity has disappeared). (Baudrillard, 50)

In this chapter in Baudrillard's writing, he speaks to Americans' "fear of the lights going out," a cultural obsession with the technological process and the continuum of man's artificial power.<sup>34</sup> Progress, and our ideations surrounding the word, tend towards artifice, energy, and space.<sup>35</sup> I imagine that efficiency and society were meant to save us, to offer humanity the time and space to experience the deeper parts of life. Instead, they are imperatives in the exaltation of production. Frachetti's depiction of our narrative of civilization, that paradoxical utopia, comes to mind once again.<sup>36</sup>

### Chapter 3

#### Whole Earth

Returning to the topic of an image's power to influence culture, the mass media cannot be ignored. Progress, production, and technology have culminated in a complicated puzzle for me as a representational painter. I feel a consistent pull to create something which translates well into a cellphone-sized reproduction. I worry that this digital landscape of reproduction inevitably binds painting, and perhaps visual art as a whole, into the failings of Guy Debord's *spectacle*, which reduces reality to "an endless supply of commodifiable fragments, while encouraging us to focus on appearances."<sup>37</sup> He writes, "In post-industrial societies where mass production and media predominate, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly experienced has been replaced with its representation in the form of images."<sup>38</sup> I feel that media imagery of today still carries painting's nostalgic echoes. I still see the Dutch still-life in formulaic Instagram influencer posts, in the iced coffees and elegant eucalyptus sprigs carefully framing some product upon vinyl laminate artificially printed with aged wood. The commodity experience stretches through time; the images appear to still serve the same role as the still-life: material culture endowed with a social role as a demonstration of one's taste and sophistication.

Nature, too, is vulnerable to representation reduction; in the media, where images of environments are mass-produced, nature becomes all the more vulnerable to a distorted and shallow interpretation. When humanity witnessed an image of the whole earth from space in the 1960s, according to conservation sociologist Robert Nisbet, a global cultural shift in perception ensued. Suddenly, humanity could hold the earth in-

hand, see it captured within the confines of a television. The representation was missing a way of connecting the image to the sensory experience.<sup>39</sup>

Another example is the rise of eco-tourism,<sup>40</sup> which created global awareness of a travel market for remote regions.<sup>41</sup> In a study of the ethics of this particular brand of tourism, Dorsey et al. describes an experience-to-object phenomenon: “Contemporary tourist destinations are exhibited seductively for the virtual consumer's gaze; they have become spaces that sustain consumerism via the standardization of images and packaging of landscapes, leading also to a privileging of 'sights' over 'sites.’”<sup>42</sup>

In poor and underrepresented nations, the people of these tourist destinations become subject as well.<sup>43</sup> Dorsey et al. continues, “Photographs of native people show them working and dressed in traditional clothing, with the majority of men wielding spears. In all photos, the people appear oblivious to the camera...supporting the notion that tourists are just 'observers and guests' with no cultural impact...References to the host cultures refer to their primitiveness...in sum, the destinations are idealized in the commodification process.”<sup>44</sup> When I flatten the landscape planes in my paintings with shadow and *trompe l'oeil*,<sup>45</sup> breaking any illusion of depth that light and form may have suggested, I am also thinking of what objectification occurs when a space is translated from a sensory experience to a sensory object.

When I start to feel a sense of image-exhaustion, I find myself particularly struck by art installations that bring a space to the visitor in some way, and who use our more connective senses—sound and smell for example—to cultivate moments of connection through multisensory engagement. Among contemporary artists caring for environment, many are considering what it

means to represent sustainability and landscape in a time when the digital landscape has a greater hold over reality.

I encountered *Earthly Paradise* (2022) at the Venice Biennale last year (Figure 9). Delcy Morelos, a Colombian artist, created a soil structure that surrounded viewers with its geometry, merging the natural and built environment.<sup>46</sup> Walking into it, I was immediately enveloped by scents and sensations: spices like clove and cinnamon, hay, and cassava flour were interspersed into the form. The humidity of the soil changed both the temperature and the feel of the air around me. Although there were no plants, it felt alive, and I think this is what Morelos was trying to show us—that aliveness of something we see as inert, something like dirt. Yet, it also felt like a memento mori. As if I were walking through a grave, I sensed something I'll be a part of someday.

Residing in the Chilean pavilion of the Venice Biennale was a collaborative art installation and science experiment (Figure 10). Ariel Bustamante, Carla Macchiavello, Dominga Sotomayor, and Alfredo Thiermann brought sound, art history, film, and architecture together in *Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*. It's meant to represent the peat bogs of Chilean Patagonia as a living body, inseparable from the indigenous cultures that make their home there.<sup>47</sup> The surrounding space is a terrarium of living bog plants, carefully transplanted to Venice, and inside this structure is a fifteen-minute sound and projection piece that the viewers sat inside of. The piece itself is, again, a sensory experience—using senses to create connection through immersion. Information about the ecological peril and vulnerability of the peat bogs is available, but the piece itself didn't feed that to me, it made me want to know it.

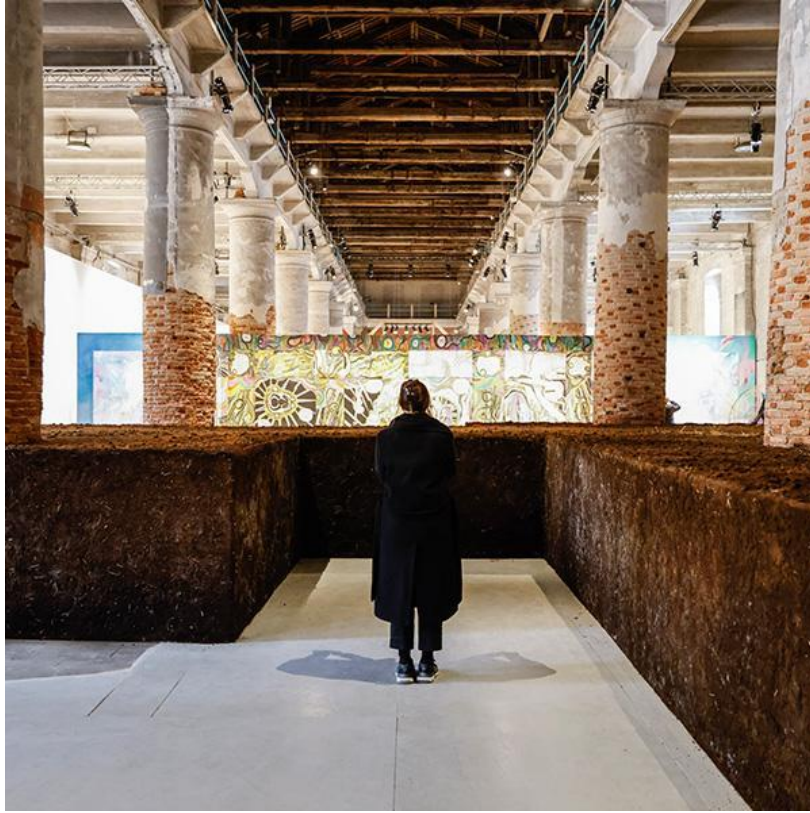


Figure 9. Delcy Morelos, *Earthly Paradise*, 2022, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.  
Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia



Figure 10. Ariel Bustamante, Carla Macchiavello, Dominga Sotomayor, Alfredo Thiermann  
*Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol*, 2022. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia. Photo by Andrea Avezzi.

I believe that these artists understand what I was starting to feel, that images and information don't really move us anymore, as a global society. They are mass-produced, known to be manipulable, and we are aware of the value of our attention. These works both come from an indigenous perspective, offering an ancestral experience to connect viewers to place we may only have seen in images.<sup>48</sup>

I am not indigenous. I'm diasporic. If the United States' relationship with our land is broken, then my relationship with my ancestral archipelago on the other side of the world is surely no more whole.

What does an environmental installation look like from the societal ivory tower? What does it look like from the perspective of not indigenous people, but a culture that still walks the land a conqueror? I conceptualized *A Phantom and a Fly* (2023) along this line of thinking, as my next step in reconstructing the picture plane and the landscape. What I wanted to offer was not connection, because I don't know that I have that connection myself, so how can I give it to you? I wanted to convey a sense of absence or disconnection, in my pursuit of depicting our relationship to nature.





Figure 11. Samantha Slone, *A Phantom and a Fly*, 2023,  
LCD monitors, polarizing filters, wood, mirrors.

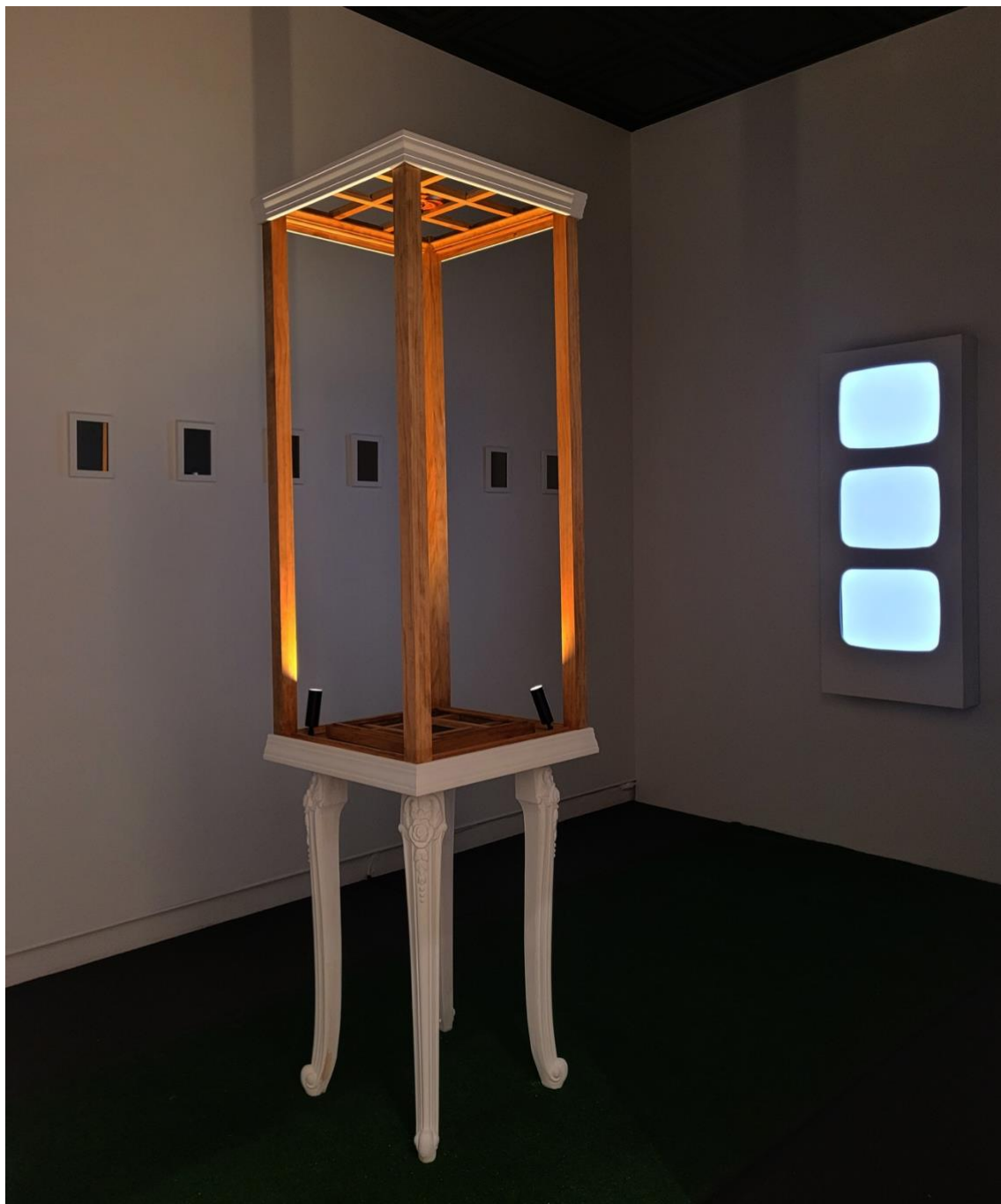


Figure 12. Samantha Slone, *A Phantom and a Fly*, 2023,  
LCD monitors, polarizing filters, wood, mirrors.



Figure 13. Samantha Slone, *A Phantom and a Fly*, 2023,  
LCD monitors, polarizing filters, wood, mirrors.

*A Phantom and a Fly* is composed of two pillar structures in a darkened room, which mirror each other in dimensions. One pillar houses three screens, stacked on top of one another, framed with rounded rectangles reminiscent of an old television or slot machine. Upon entering the room, the monitors appear blank, luminating the space with a cool, white glow. The videos on the screens are only visible when viewed through the mirrors on the surrounding walls. The video is a synchronized, rotating, exquisite corpse of landscape components, depicting a sky, center, and earth in varying combinations. *Endling* often appears in the center, animated with a Mars sunset.

The other pillar acts as a vitrine representative of a domestic interior or the contained landscaping of suburban exteriors. It's constructed of fine wood and decorative trim pieces with a cherry stain. In its ceiling sits a carefully framed still-life of spiral-peeled oranges, a nod to the Dutch still-lives,<sup>49</sup> while its floor holds a grid of mirrors, both uprooting the Western window. The viewer is distanced from both the painting and the image on the screen; they require effort and movement to be seen and are not listed among the materials.

The core experiential component of this installation is a sense of being surrounded by something—knowledge, sight, force—that can only be witnessed from a certain vantage point or with a certain lens or filter. It uses a framework of our literally constructed environments, creating an object out of familiar architectural components to create a deconstructed view of landscapes.

With my skepticism about the reproduced art image and its lack of sensorial breadth, I veil and obstruct the representational components in *A Phantom and a Fly*—even my own painting is positioned in a way that a camera would struggle to capture in the low light. Only in person is it truly legible.

## Conclusion

“In today’s globalized and information-based world, we live in a continuous disjuncture from the actual location and the events that surround us: while we are sitting on the grass in the mountains in summer, we read about a bomb exploding in a city; while we are drinking coffee in the city, we see images of floods in distant lands.”<sup>50</sup>

— Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller*

I maintain that, in this particular time, it means something to spend time with an image as a painter, to give attention as an act of generosity rather than exchange or transaction. The act of making itself holds some quiet power against distance, distraction, disconnection, and detachment. The fundamental lessons of representation are the antithesis to the detached world I’ve described: slow down, look closely, paint what is seen and not what is known—leave behind learned abstractions to honor the subject. It is healing to be a maker of things which cannot truly be reproduced.<sup>51</sup> In a world of mass-produced images, I now find myself painting to breach the total subsumption of my work into the assembly-line flow of visual stimuli. I do this by prioritizing practice over product, to lend time and thought in a world that seems designed to distract and numb me.<sup>52</sup> Before attention was a commodity, it was a rare and pure form of generosity.<sup>53</sup>

How does one learn to relate to nature? When I gawk at the nebulosity of the task of cultural re-rooting, I find myself searching for metaphors with which to orient myself within nature. These words by the artist and writer Bill Viola come to mind: “In our daily urban world, increasingly and many times exclusively composed of people-made devices and structures, the body and its functions remain one of the last vestiges of nature, if not the ultimate, that we can live in close contact with.”<sup>54</sup> If I think of my body as part of nature, I don’t feel quite as daunted.

The botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer says that the smell of humus in a forest floor invokes an oxytocin response, the hormone release which forms our social bonds.<sup>55</sup> In *War of the Worlds*, H.G. Wells writes, “By the toll of a billion deaths man has bought his birthright of the earth.”<sup>56</sup> He speaks to the complex microbial and genetic rapport we have with life on earth, having evolved together over millennia. Whether we humans feel it or not, we are deeply biologically and ecologically interconnected. Reconnecting is a matter of finding our way home.

My practice is a continuous exercise in awareness and grounding in reality as an effort to unveil, subvert, and understand the complex and multivalent landscapes of detachment that I unavoidably live in. The goal of this body of work is to create visual microcosms of this experiential condition, a reverse-engineering of the anthropocentric paradigm for the purposes of someday rebuilding anew. My work is simultaneously a critique of legacy systems of power and capital as well as a devotional pursuit of personal accountability and reformation towards a healthier relationship with the natural world.

The ideas and body of work I’ve shared in this text do not summarize the whole of my thought or artistic practice; rather, it is a window into part of the praxis-theory dialogue I’ve engaged in in recent years. The path of being a maker, for me, means a continuous expanding of awareness and learning from material, culture, and community. Thus, this dialogue and my methodologies will undoubtedly expand and shift moving forward. Through careful attention, I am learning to connect—with my immediate and global communities, with the spaces I occupy, and with the land I walk upon.

## Notes

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1. Acknowledging *landscape* as more than a setting or place, I'll be using the term to refer either to the genre of painting or, as in "capitalist landscape," in the way of Denis Cosgrove: "Landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience in a way that neither region nor area immediately suggest. Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world."

I also consider W.J.T. Mitchell in his "Theses on Landscape":

"1. Landscape is not a genre of art but a medium.

2. Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other. As such, it is like money: good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value.

3. Like money, landscape is a social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value. It does so by naturalizing its conventions and conventionalizing its nature.

4. Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.

5. Landscape is a medium found in all cultures.

6. Landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism.

7. Theses 5 and 6 do not contradict one other.

8. Landscape is an exhausted medium, no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression. Like life, landscape is boring; we must not say so.

9. The landscape referred to in Thesis 8 is the same as that of Thesis 6."

Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (United Kingdom: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 13.; W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.

2. "Anthropocentrism is based on a perception of a fundamental dualism between organizations and the natural environment" (1054). Ronald E. Purser, Changkil Park, and Alfonso Montuori, "Limits to Anthropocentrism: Toward an Ecocentric Organization Paradigm?" *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 4 (1995): 1053–89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258965>.

3. Raychelle Aluaq Daniel, "What Is 'Indigenous Knowledge' and Why Does It Matter? Integrating Ancestral Wisdom and Approaches into Federal Decision-Making," The White House, December 2, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/2022/12/02/what-is-indigenous-knowledge-and-why-does-it-matter-integrating-ancestral-wisdom-and-approaches-into-federal-decision-making/>.

4. "Explicit conceptualization of *attention* as a distinct resource is not just more accurate; it allows examination of the impact of emergent means of attention acquisition through pathways that do not start with, or remain limited to, traditional mass media, even if they do also incorporate it" (850). Zeynep Tufekci, "'Not This One': Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (2013): 848-870, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479369>.

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5. I'll note the irony that the systems I refer to may not have been possible without the economic growth which we gained from the industrial revolution.
6. As an example in contrast, the waste removal systems in the Philippines are severely lacking. My family, living in Metropolitan Manila, must remain consistently conscious of the plastic packaging they use. On my last visit in 2019, I witnessed several people sweeping piles of plastic sachets into the canals simply to get them off the streets.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (United Kingdom: Dover Publications, 2011), 42.
8. Distance, distraction, disconnection, detachment. How can we empathize with and act on behalf of someone we can't see? How can we relate?
9. "The development of [linear] perspective was therefore a precursor to scientific conceptualizations of the environment, with the world seen as a distant spectacle and the viewer as an immobile spectator, a precursor of the view that humans could locate themselves at the apex and center of the natural world." Purser, Park, and Montuori, "Limits to Anthropocentrism: Toward an Ecocentric Organization Paradigm?" 1056.
10. Scott Prudham, "Commodification," in *A Companion to Environmental Geography* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 125.
11. "Thus, just as production founded on capital creates universal industriousness on one side – i.e. surplus labour, value-creating labour – so does it create on the other side a system of general exploitation of the natural and human qualities, a system of general utility, utilizing science itself just as much as all the physical and mental qualities, while there appears nothing *higher in itself*, nothing legitimate for itself, outside this circle of social production and exchange. Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as well as of the social bond itself by the members of society. Hence the great civilizing influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere *local developments* of humanity and as *nature-idolatry*. For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production." Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited, 2005), iv.
- 12 Ibid.
13. Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 34 (1998): 167, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20140414>.
14. A *vanitas* contains objects symbolic of the inevitability of death (memento mori), the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures, and symbols of pursuits which may be more noble or meaningful. Often refers to a painting, but not always. "Vanitas," in *Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010.



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15. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 42.

16. Ibid.

17. I tend to think of the word “Civilization” with a capital C and as a conceptual force which has driven the trajectory of our social and cultural production. I consider this the current paradigm of being human in the world, one which is innately tied to anthropocentrism and a domesticity.

18. Michael Frachetti, "The Utopian Paradox," TEDxWUSTL, YouTube video, 20:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hn-KYxj4DP4>, 2:00.

19. Ibid, 18:00.

20. “Beginning in the 1820s with Thomas Cole and then with the maturing aesthetic of the Hudson River School by mid-century (in the work of Frederic Edwin Church, Jasper Cropsey, Asher B. Durand, and John Frederick Kensett most notably) the landscape genre came to support a considerable weight of ideas surrounding the central role of nature in the rise of the American nation-state, the country's providential destiny in settling and occupying the continent, and the proper form of a godly republic.” Angela Miller, “Albert Bierstadt, Landscape Aesthetics, and the Meanings of the West in the Civil War Era,” in *Terrain of Freedom: American Art and the Civil War*, vol. 27 (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, 2001), 41.

21. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 31.

22. From urban distractions, from hypnotic habits of the 9-to-5, and from mind-numbing media submersion.

23. Miller, “Albert Bierstadt, Landscape Aesthetics, and the Meanings of the West in the Civil War Era,” 41.

24. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, 31.

25. I take some inspiration from Jennifer Peeples’s term, *toxic sublime*. This essay uses the term to consider the problematics of beautiful photographs of polluted landscapes—by making these sites visible and visually appealing, they neglect the fact that most toxic sites have no visible or theatrical presence, thus failing to produce visual awareness. Although the term is used to critique, I enjoy the term “toxic pastoral” as a way of nodding to the aestheticization of landscape. Since I use the landscape in a way that specifically points to its objectification, it feels appropriate. Jennifer Peeples, “Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes,” *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 4 (July 2011): 374, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2011.616516>.

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26. Recall page eight of this text: “I couldn’t depict the grandeur of nature without thinking of the imperialist message of the American Westward Expansion-era painters. Anything captured in that horizontal format just felt—captured. It felt like I was binding a whole world into a sensory object, turning it into something that could be possessed.”

27. “Pioneers 10 and 11, which preceded Voyager, both carried small metal plaques identifying their time and place of origin for the benefit of any other spacefarers that might find them in the distant future. With this example before them, NASA placed a more ambitious message aboard Voyager 1 and 2, a kind of time capsule, intended to communicate a story of our world to extraterrestrials. The Voyager message is carried by a phonograph record, a 12-inch gold-plated copper disk containing sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth. The contents of the record were selected for NASA by a committee chaired by Carl Sagan of Cornell University, et. al. Dr. Sagan and his associates assembled 115 images and a variety of natural sounds, such as those made by surf, wind and thunder, birds, whales, and other animals. To this they added musical selections from different cultures and eras, and spoken greetings from Earth-people in fifty-five languages, and printed messages from President Carter and U.N. Secretary General Waldheim. Each record is encased in a protective aluminum jacket, together with a cartridge and a needle. Instructions, in symbolic language, explain the origin of the spacecraft and indicate how the record is to be played. The 115 images are encoded in analog form.” “The Golden Record,” NASA, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/>.

28. “Howdy Strangers,” NASA, accessed April 26, 2023, [https://www.nasa.gov/missions/deepspace/MI\\_CM\\_Feature\\_02.html](https://www.nasa.gov/missions/deepspace/MI_CM_Feature_02.html).

29. “Voyager - The Golden Record Cover.” NASA. Accessed April 26, 2023. <https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/golden-record-cover/>.

30. NATO, an intergovernmental military alliance, heads their “approach to space” website page with the following claim: “Space is a dynamic and rapidly evolving area, which is essential to the Alliance’s deterrence and defence. In 2019, Allies adopted NATO’s Space Policy and recognised space as a new operational domain, alongside air, land, maritime and cyberspace. This policy guides NATO’s approach to space and ensures the right space-based support to the Alliance’s operations and missions in such areas as communications, navigation and intelligence.” “NATO’s Approach to Space,” NATO, October 7, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_175419.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_175419.htm).

31. “Mars & Beyond,” SpaceX, accessed April 26, 2023, <https://www.spacex.com/human-spaceflight/mars/>.

32. Linear perspective has also been linked to the objectification of landscape: “Linear perspective became a crucial artistic and scientific tool, part of a way of knowing the world through distanced seeing, where the observer views the landscape as if he or she were gazing through a window or lens of a camera. Based on this new ‘geometry of the eyes,’ linear perspective was instrumental in the creation of scale drawings, maps, charts, graphs, and

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diagrams—all of which were tools for representing the world in terms of spatial homogeneity and the Cartesian coordinates (Edgerton, 1975; Maruyama, 1980, 1992; Romanyshyn, 1989). The development of perspective was therefore a precursor to scientific conceptualizations of the environment, with the world seen as a distant spectacle and the viewer as an immobile spectator, a precursor of the view that humans could locate themselves at the apex and center of the natural world through the detached inquiry Descartes would later make the crux of his method” Purser, Park, and Montuori, “Limits to Anthropocentrism: Toward an Ecocentric Organization Paradigm?” 1056.

33. Consider Jan Van Eyck’s *Lucca Madonna* (1436).

34. Jean Baudrillard, *America* (United Kingdom: Verso Books, 2010), 50. This quote is elaborated nicely by the following passage, also from page fifty: “In short, in America the arrival of night-time or periods of rest cannot be accepted, nor can the Americans bear to see the technological process halted. Everything has to be working all the time, there has to be no let-up in man’s artificial power, and the intermittent character of natural cycles (the seasons, day and night, heat and cold) has to be replaced by a functional continuum that is sometimes absurd (deep down, there is the same refusal of the intermittent nature of true and false: everything is true; and of good and evil: everything is good).”

35. In Benjamin’s famed critique of historicism, he writes about Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*: “A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation* (United States: Fordham University Press, 2011), 75; Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

36. Fossil-fueled, technology driven, urban—and unsustainable. Frachetti, "The Utopian Paradox," 20:36.

37. I’ve pulled from a more contemporary implementation of Debord’s ideas behind *Society of the Spectacle* for this section: “Guy Debord argued that in the society of the spectacle, life itself has become reduced to a commodity. The spectacle reduces reality to an endless supply of commodifiable fragments, while encouraging us to focus on appearances. Our experience and way of living have been downgraded from 'having' to 'appearing’: Everything is about appearances. The society of the spectacle is, for Debord, a society of atomized and isolated individuals who are only united through a common exposure to the same images. The spectacle means that reality is replaced by images.” Jacob Johanssen, "Immaterial Labour and Reality TV: The Affective Surplus of Excess," in *Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital*

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*Capitalism*, ed. Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017), 270; Guy Debord, “The Commodity as Spectacle,” in *The Society of the Spectacle*, revised (Detroit: Black & Red Books, 1970), 33-44.

38. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black & Red Books, 1970),16.

39. James Nisbet, “Planetary Visions: Land Art, Minimalism, and the Whole Earth,” in *Ecologies, Environments, Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 80.

40. “i.e. ecologically sensitive travel to remote areas to learn about ecosystems, as well as in cultural tourism, focusing on the people who are a part of ecosystems.”

Elizabeth R. Dorsey, H. Leslie Steeves, and Luz Estella Porras, “Advertising Ecotourism on the Internet: Commodifying Environment and Culture,” *New Media & Society* 6, no. 6 (2004): 753, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144804044328>; David Holmes, *Virtual Globalization: Virtual Spaces/Tourist Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2001), 5.

41. Recall again the pastoral. The desire to escape back to nature repeats itself, pastoral promises regurgitated from history in the form of ecotourist advertisements.

42. Ibid, 754.

43. Again, I find myself picturing Westward Expansion paintings, and the way American Indigenous peoples are represented as accessories to a picturesque landscape. Bierstadt’s *Rocky Mountain, Lander’s Peak* (1863), for example.

44. Dorsey et al, 767.

45. As in my paintings *Bushfire* and *Moira (Rum Creek)*.

46. “While this installation evokes the Minimalist aesthetics of works such as Walter De Maria’s *New York Earth Room* (1977), Morelos’ use of earth is informed by Andean and Amazonian Amerindian cosmologies and conveys the notion that nature is not something inert that we access and control at our will from an outside and exceptional position, but that we are earthly beings – we become, live, die, and decompose with and as the earth. As the soil penetrates and affects our body and senses, our human becoming takes a new shape: we apprehend we are always becoming *humus*, as the Latin etymology of the very word ‘human’ recalls.” “Biennale Arte 2022: Delcy Morelos,” La Biennale di Venezia, October 18, 2022, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/delcy-morelos>.

47. “*Turba Tol Hol-Hol Tol* is an experimental path focusing on the conservation of peatlands, the most efficient natural ecosystem for regulating the planet’s climate yet one of the most overlooked by research. In the language of the Tierra del Fuego’s indigenous Selk’nam people, *Hol-Hol Tol* means the “heart of peatlands”. The exhibition including artists Ariel Bustamante, Carla Macchiavello, Dominga Sotomayor, and Alfredo Thiermann immerses us in a material and ancestral experience of the Patagonian peatlands through a large multisensory installation and scientific experiment. Profoundly rooted in the environmental humanities, this

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project aims to both raise the profile of peatlands and outline possible courses of action at a political, social, and ecological level.” “Biennale Arte 2022: Chile,” La Biennale di Venezia, June 9, 2022, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/chile>.

48. Ibid.

49. The citrus is present in fifty-one percent of all still-lives produced in Europe during the Dutch Golden Age. Throughout that time, it went from an exotic rarity to a common staple of the cuisine all along its import path. It was an opportunity for painters to demonstrate their skill in articulating the careful curls of the famed spiral peel and for buyers to exhibit their refined tastes. When I was a child, our only piece of wall-hanging art was a big, cheap printout of a Dutch still-life, artist unbeknownst to me, probably found at some thrift store. It contained one of these spiral-peels. I consider it to be one of the reasons I started painting. James Langton, “When Still-Life Gives You Lemons: The Significance of the Citrus Fruit in Art and History,” *The National*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/when-still-life-gives-you-lemons-the-significance-of-the-citrus-fruit-in-art-and-history-1.970482>.

50. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller* (Long Island City, NY: P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2001), 33.

51. I think of my parents on an assembly line, the materials continuously passing through their hands towards a product over which they have no agency, ownership, or connection.

52. Swipe, scroll, double tap, repeat. A teenager lip-syncs fifteen seconds of Megan Thee Stallion’s Savage, Zip-loc (ironically) has a new Green line of products, a couple survived an apartment bombing in Ukraine, 10 Things You NEED to Know, AI-generated illustrations by zodiac, another community in India embarks on a climate migration, Trying Tiktok’s Viral Leggings, someone you went to high school with had a baby. Content creators thrust wanton hands into the void of digital immortality. Images of global tragedy are juxtaposed with the trivial and commercial in an infinite flow of guilt, performative absolution, overstimulation and desensitization, and Sontag and Debord roll over in their graves.

53. “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. It is given to few minds to notice that things and beings exist.” This quote embodies the connection that I seek. Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil a Life* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1976), 426.

54. Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 233.

55. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 236.

56. Herbert George Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, Copyright Edition (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1898), 270.

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